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## Article:

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**Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture**, by Sarah Amato; pp. 320. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, \$65.00.

**Wild Animal Skins in Victorian Britain: Zoos, Collections, Portraits, and Maps**, by Ann C. Colley; pp. xii + 206. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014, £65.00, \$104.95.

Animals were central to Victorian culture: cats, dogs, and the occasional monkey inhabited Victorian homes, while tigers and hippos enthralled visitors at the zoo. Dead polar bears posed with children in the museum, and elephants paraded through the streets with traveling menageries. In all of these guises, animals functioned as commodities, valued possessions whose existence reflected the status, aspirations, and fantasies of their human owners.

Sarah Amato's *Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture* and Anne C. Colley's *Wild Animal Skins in Victorian Britain: Zoos, Collections, Portraits, and Maps* explore the role of animal commodities in the Victorian period, examining the different ways in which animals shaped—and sometimes complicated—human ideas about class, race, gender, and empire. *Beastly Possessions* focuses on the commodification of animals and their incorporation into urban life. Amato begins by looking at the most intimate human-animal relationship—pet-keeping—noting how the pet “was alternately and sometimes simultaneously perceived as an object and possession, a subject and a commodity” (22). She examines the flourishing Victorian pet trade, which extended from canaries and rabbits to parrots and more exotic pets, and explores how the keeping and breeding of cats and dogs illuminated complex gender dynamics in an era when women were campaigning for better education and the vote. The following chapters assess human-animal interactions in the zoo, and dissect the controversial case of the “white” elephant Toung Taloung, exhibited at London Zoo in 1884 by the American showman P. T. Barnum. The book concludes with an exploration of dead animals and the popular art of taxidermy, a practice which straddled the home and the museum, and included both deceased pets and hunting trophies.

*Wild Animal Skins*, in contrast, concentrates specifically on the skin as a site of encounter between humans and animals. Construing the skin as “a surface that carried the marks of not only identity but also memory and [which], like a text, exists to be read,” Colley looks at the ways in which animal hides mediated Victorian interactions with other species and shaped their conceptions of the natural world (10). In the first chapter, she focuses on Belle Vue Zoo, Manchester, where live animals featured in dramatic battle re-enactments and dead animals appeared stuffed in the Zoo's on-site museum. In chapter 2, she examines the collection of exotic animal skins for display in museums and the logistical problems associated with this activity—a point nicely illustrated by an examination of two Victorian collectors, the 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby and his niece, Elisabeth Hornby. Chapter 3 explores the role of animals in portraiture, including the conversion of animal skins into art, while in chapter 4 she discusses the importance of touching animals at the zoo. The final chapter addresses zoogeography and links between animal skins and maps.

Several themes permeate both books. One is the role of the senses—particularly touch—in encounters with exotic animals. As both authors show, zoo visitors not only looked at animals, but interacted with them on a bodily level. Whether it was feeding buns to the bears, riding on an elephant's back, or running a hand along the rhinoceros's

skin, Victorians wanted to experience exotic beasts directly, something which Colley ascribes to a “desire to reach out whatever the cost, and feel the exotic other, to go beyond the boundaries of one’s own skin and actually finger the fur of a wild creature” (128). Keepers, in particular, enjoyed an intimate, tactile relationship with their charges, often stroking or caressing them; an *Animal Care Journal* for Belle Vue Zoo noted that the giraffe is “ticklish between the nostrils” and that the rhinoceros has “pink and seeming delicate skin between the folds”—evidence that its author touched and observed the beasts he looked after (*Animal Care Journal*, Belle Vue Gardens, Jennison Collection, Chetham’s Library, Manchester, F.5.04).

Another theme addressed by both authors is the relationship between exotic animals and empire. The collection and exhibition of animals in zoos and museums has often been perceived as evidence of imperial power, reflecting the expansion of Britain’s colonial holdings and the improvement in global transportation with the advent of railways and steamships. How far the average zoo visitor bought into the imperial message has been questioned, however, and Amato and Colley differ on this issue. For Amato, zoos were indeed microcosms of empire, their animals functioning as “representatives of their species and referents to the British power to collect animals indigenous to far-flung territories” (112). The civilizing of animals in the zoo paralleled the so-called civilization of non-European peoples in foreign territories, with the pythons being taught not to eat live rabbits and the chimpanzee, Sally, to eat cooked mutton and beef tea, rather than killing birds in her cage. The keepers, meanwhile, added to the authenticity of the exhibition, providing “a spectacle of British masculine working-class authority over beasts” (130–31). For Colley, on the other hand, human control over animals (or parts of animals) was less certain: “the gathering, arranging, transporting and labelling of skins from foreign territories” representing not British power, but, “the messiness of empire” (4). Colley sees the urge to touch animals at the zoo as arising not from a desire to dominate, but instead from curiosity and a longing to transcend species barriers. There are inconsistencies in her argument, however, for the discussion of Belle Vue in chapter 1 suggests that the animals there *were* emblems of imperial power.

Of particular interest in both books is the relationship between skin and identity. Colley sees the Victorians’ fascination with wild animal skins as part of a growing interest in dermatology, race, tattooing, and early forensic science. As she points out, however, identification could prove elusive if those skins were damaged—a gorilla carcass sent to Professor Richard Owen, for instance, decomposed en route, having been improperly preserved. Amato also tackles the issue of skin and identity when she assesses scientific and popular reaction to the Burmese elephant Toung Taloung. Exhibited by Barnum as a sacred “white” elephant, Toung disappointed British viewers for failing to live up to his billing, because his skin was in fact grey with blotches of pink pigmentation on his face and trunk. In a nuanced reading of Toung’s reception, Amato shows how the elephant’s contested whiteness sparked discussions about authenticity, skin disease, and racial purity, and raised unsettling questions about what it meant to be white. She also notes the links drawn between whiteness and hygiene—an idea capitalized on (and propagated) by Pear’s Soap, which used Toung Taloung in its advertisements. Skin was indeed closely connected to identity, but that identity could be fluid.

Finally, both Colley and Amato explore the posthumous uses of animals, both domestic and wild, and their conversion into ornaments and museum specimens. With the growing popularity of taxidermy, dead pets were converted into candle holders, and hunting trophies transformed into furniture. Amato suggests that dead creatures were more malleable than their living counterparts, with taxidermy rendering “even the fiercest beasts inert, touchable and subject to human whim” (208). Colley concurs with this view, though notes that even dead beasts could pose problems if they were mishandled, damaged, or infested with insects—a not infrequent occurrence. For both authors, stuffed animals were in part sites of memory, their remains recalling a daring hunting exploit or a departed pet. Colley, for instance, offers the interesting example of the elephant Maharajah at Belle Vue Zoo, whose skeleton and trunk were preserved in the establishment’s museum after his death. “Through the memory of touch, this piece of skin function[ed] as the passage to the elephant’s existence,” allowing visitors to recall their interactions with the living animal (44).

*Beastly Possessions* and *Wild Animal Skins* make a number of important contributions to the history of animals in the Victorian era. They add to recent literature on the history of pets, menageries, the senses, and animal emotions, demonstrating how animals were incorporated into a thriving consumer culture. Of the two books, Amato’s is the more coherent, moving outwards from the domestic pet to the zoo and the museum and showing how animals can provide a useful lens for understanding wider social issues. Colley’s book makes many interesting observations, but feels more like a collection of separate essays than a consistent narrative. It is also somewhat undermined by an excessive number of digressions and overly long footnotes, some of which distract from the main argument. Both books, however, offer a valuable reminder of the centrality of animals in Victorian culture.

HELEN COWIE  
University of York

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**The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience**, by Lauren M. E. Goodlad; pp. 353. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, £50.00, \$95.00.

By what logic might the boxed set of AMC’s *Mad Men* (2007–2015) vie for critical attention with Anthony Trollope’s *The Prime Minister* (1875–76)? How might a rethinking of a tradition from Charles Dickens to Gustav Flaubert and E. M. Forster help us understand the afterlives of Victorian seriality? Why have all my novel-reading colleagues suddenly taken to fervent water cooler discussions about TV? And who is Don Draper anyway?

This admittedly jumbled synecdoche is a poor substitute for the densely argued richness of Lauren M. E. Goodlad’s *Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience*. But it does, I think, capture something of the experience of reading it, or better, of taking it all in. For rather like the over-stuffed houses of Victorian fame, there is a lot for the eye to absorb. Examining in detail not only major texts such